

# Australian unions call strikes as BHP shifts to individual contracts

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Workers employed by Australian mineral and steel company BHP have begun a campaign of stoppages against the company's attempt to shift about 1,000 workers employed at its iron ore mines in the remote Pilbara region of Western Australia (WA) onto individual work contracts.

About 200 workers at the Point Nelson and Finucane Island iron ore mines at Port Hedland and the Newman mine in WA, went on strike for 24 hours in mid-December. Some 1,500 workers employed at the company's rod and wire plant in Newcastle, New South Wales and its steel facilities in the Melbourne suburbs of Geelong and Sunshine struck for one day last week, as did steelworkers at BHP's Whyalla, South Australia, plant.

At off-shift meetings on December 23, union delegates at the BHP's largest steelworks, at Port Kembla, adopted a union recommendation to stage a 24-hour strike, but not until next month. Union officials, who are appealing to BHP for negotiations, have set no date for the stoppage.

The Construction Forestry Energy and Mining Union leadership has indicated that next month it is also likely to call rolling stoppages at BHP coal mines in Queensland.

BHP is striving to match its competitors in eliminating all remaining protective work practices in the Pilbara mines, combined with shift arrangements that will allow continuous around-the-clock operations. The company has offered to substantially increase base wage rates and to give a \$2,000 bonus to workers who sign over immediately. Management says that 400 of the 1,000 workers have done so.

BHP denies that its actions in the Pilbara will extend to the steelworks—where it has worked intimately with the union leadership, using collective agreements to

destroy tens of thousands of jobs over the past two decades, culminating in the closure of the Newcastle plant and the decision to sell off Whyalla and other steel-making operations.

But the company's new CEO, Paul Anderson has made it plain that no section of BHP will be exempted from global restructuring. "We're seeing the emergence of mega-corporations. In the environment of mega-corporations, cost is king and size does matter. The biggest, most cost-efficient producer is the winner. There'll be two types of successful companies: the mega players and the niche players. In steel we have some wonderful technology, great costs of production, but we're towards the bottom of the top 20 producers and account for only about 1 percent of total steel production in the world".

In appealing to BHP for talks, the union leaders have emphasised that they do not oppose the introduction of a new work regime. Their only objection is that BHP has sidelined them and imposed its measures without their assistance.

Greg Combet, the secretary-elect of the Australian Council of Trade Unions, the country's peak union body, told the media after he held talks with senior BHP officials: "The unions and their members in the Pilbara are more than willing to talk about efficiencies and flexibility to boost BHP's domestic and international competitiveness in iron ore."

This was confirmed by Australian Workers Union national president, Graham Roberts who stated: "He (Combet) put to them on behalf of the unions a commitment to bring about world's best practice that would substantially lower costs in the Pilbara operations. I have given a commitment to the ACTU, and through them to BHP, that I would become involved in the development of agreements that would

bring these things about."

This is a clear indication that even if workers succeed in blocking the introduction of individual contracts, the unions will seek to supervise the same conditions and destruction of jobs.



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